Heraclianus

(Mid 4th Century – 7 March 413)

BRIEFING

Heraclianus (Ancient Greek: Ἡρακλειανὸς, *Herakleianòs*; died 7 March 413) was a provincial governor and a usurper of the Western Roman Empire (412–413) opposed to Emperor Honorius, who had originally brought him to power. Heraclianus helped put down a rebellion by Priscus Attalus. However, he decided to stage his own rebellion and during his invasion of the Italian peninsula, was either defeated in battle or captured and executed.

BIOGRAPHY

Opposition to Priscus Attalus

The first known act of Heraclianus was the killing of the powerful *Magister militum* Stilicho (22 August 408) for Emperor Honorius, who wanted to remove his influential general. Honorius rewarded Heraclianus with the appointment to the rank of *Comes Africae*, Governor of the important province of Africa, in late 408.

According to Paulus Orosius, Heraclianus was sent to Africa in 409. Orosius also states that the Governor of Africa in 408 was "John", who was killed by the people of his province. However, in another account, Zosimus states that Heraclianus was the successor of Bathanarius, brother-in-law of Stilicho, put to death by Honorius.

In 409, with the help of the Visigoths of King Alaric I, Priscus Attalus rebelled against Honorius, whose seat of power was in Ravenna, and set up his own court in Rome. Heraclianus remained loyal to Honorius and tightly controlled African ports to restrict the grain supply to the city of Rome and starve Rome out.

Attalus did not initially send an army to Africa against Heraclianus, as it would have to have been under Visigothic lead. Deceived by false prophecies or moved by his own jealousy of the Visigoths, he sent a lone representative, Constans, counting on his authority alone to depose Heraclianus or convince the provincials to rebel. However, Constans was killed, and Heraclianus sent Honorius the great sum he had confiscated from the envoys, intended to bribe the local population. Alaric wanted to send an army against Heraclianus under the command of his own man Drumas. But Attalus opposed this, and Alaric deposed him in 410. As Alaric intended to send a rather small army of only 500 men, it is probable that Heraclianus had only a very small force at his own disposal. However, it is also probable that Heraclianus had the support of the local population, as Emperor Honorius had recently issued a tolerance edict in favour of the Donatists, a Christian sect very popular in Africa. According to the historian Adrian Goldsworthy, Attalus sent a Roman commander with regular troops to secure the province of Africa, but these were seriously defeated by the Roman troops of Heraclianus, who for the time being remained loyal to the Emperor Honorius.

Usurpation against Honorius

In 412 Heraclianus was designated for the consulate of the year 413, but in all probability he was never appointed Consul. Confident in his own power and instigated by Sabinus, his son-in-law, he rebelled against Honorius and proclaimed himself *Augustus*. His first act was to interrupt the grain supply to the city of Rome, as he had successfully done against Priscus Attalus. Next he gathered several ships along with troops to invade Italy. Honorius had Heraclianus and his supporters proclaimed enemies of the State and condemned to death with an edict issued in Ravenna on 7 July 412.

In 413, Heraclianus arrived in Italy with a large army to fight Honorius. With regards to his death, there are two versions: According to Orosius and Marcellinus Comes, Heraclianus arrived in Italy and moved towards Rome, but he was frightened by the arrival of *Comes* Marinus. He left his army and fled to Carthage, where he was put to death on 7 March. The second version, as put forth by Hydatius, sees Heraclianus defeated at *Utriculum* (maybe *Oriculum*, in Umbria, halfway between Rome and Ravenna), in a battle with 50,000 deaths, then fleeing to Carthage, where he was put to death by envoys sent by Honorius in the temple of Memoria. Sabinus, Heraclianus' son-in-law, fled to the eastern court at Constantinople but was later sent back and then exiled.

Heraclianus' name does not appear in the *Fasti consulares*, the list of all Roman consuls, as Honorius probably revoked his appointment and left Lucius as Consul without colleague. Heraclianus' acts were revoked; his possessions, 2,000 lb of gold and land of the same value, were confiscated and given to Flavius Constantius.

Jerome accused Heraclianus of mistreating those who had fled from Rome to Carthage on the occasion of Attalus' usurpation (Heraclianus imprisoned the noblewomen Anicia Faltonia Proba, Anicia Iuliana and Demetrias, and freed them only after a huge payment), and of being a drunken and corrupt man.

WAR OF HERACLIANUS

The War of Heraclianus was a short military conflict in 412–413, between the imperial generals Heraclianus and Constantius III, in a period known for being very turbulent and violent. There were a large number of uprisings in the Western Roman Empire and various groups of barbarian tribes crossed the empire. The conflict between Heraclianus and Constantius can be seen as one of many links in the chain of events that set in motion the downfall of the Roman Empire. In the conflict, Constantius remained loyal to the emperor and Heraclian tried to become emperor of the empire himself.

Fragmented Sources

Despite the historical significance of the events, few primary sources about the conflict itself have survived. What little is known comes from the descriptions of the contemporaries Orosius, Hydatius, Prosper of Aquitaine and Zosimus.

Cause

Constantius was commander-in-chief of the Western Roman emperor Honorius, Heraclianus a Roman general who governed the province of Africa as military governor. The two rivals both made careers in the Roman army after the fall of Stilicho in 408 and were on good terms with Emperor Honorius. Heraclianus was the one who received orders from Honorius to arrest Stilicho. In Constantius, Honorius saw the right person to lead his army. The appointment of Constantius as commander-in-chief led to an increasing quarrel that culminated in the final conflict in 412.

According to Orosius, Heraclianus was appointed the new military governor of the North African province in 409. Orosius states that his predecessor John was murdered. In another account, however, Zosimus states that Heraclianus was the successor of Bathanarius, brother-in-law of Stilicho, who was put to death by the emperor Honorius. With this appointment Heraclianus was rewarded for his good services.

Heraclianus supported the emperor when Priscus Attalus, with the help of the Visigoths of King Alaric I, revolted in Italy against Honorius, whose seat of power was in Ravenna, in 409. Attalus then established his own court in Rome. In this conflict, Heraclianus ensured that no ships with grain left the African ports for Rome to supply the city. By restricting the grain supply, Heraclian tried to starve Rome, causing the population to revolt against the usurper. Attalus then brought an army of Visigoths against Heraclianus, but this was not very successful. Honorius offered to share power with Attalus in 410, but he refused. Attalus was then deposed by Alaric after he refused to let him lead another campaign into Africa. As a reward for his good services, Heraclianus was appointed by Honorius in 412 for the consulship of the year 413. However, the actual appointment as consul never took place, because after Constantius was appointed commander-in-chief in 411, Heraclianus turned against the emperor. Confident of his own strength and urged by Sabinus, his son-in-law, he rebelled. He declared himself emperor.

The Conflict

Heraclianus's first act in the conflict was to stop grain deliveries to the city of Rome, as he had previously done successfully against the usurper Priscus Attalus. He did the same with the supplies to the Visigoths of Ataulf who stayed near Marseille in southern Gaul. His next move was to assemble a fleet to ferry troops to Italy for an invasion. In the capital Ravenna, Honorius responded to this threat by declaring Heraclianus and his supporters enemies of the state and sentencing them to death by edict on July 7, 412.

Heraclianus' behavior is difficult to explain, because until mid-412 there were no obvious signs of trouble in Africa. It has been argued that Heraclianus rebelled to avoid facing consequences for the crimes he committed against refugees. However, this is based on the testimony of Jerome, clearly exaggerated and of questionable reliability. Orosius claims that Heraclianus revolted because he felt he was in danger, but does not explain the precise nature of this danger. However, East has made it plausible that the rise of Honorius' new Magister utriusque militia Constantius was the cause of this.

In March 413, Heraclianus landed in Italy near Rome with an army to go to war against Honorius. He marched north along the Via Flaminia where he engaged the Roman army commanded by General Marinus at Utriculum. Two versions have been submitted regarding the events that take place. According to Orosius and Marcellinus Comes, Heraclianus arrived in Italy and marched on Rome, but was shocked by the size of the army that Constantius brought against him. He abandoned his army and fled to Carthage, where he was captured and executed on March 7. In the second surviving version, written by Hydatius, Heraclian's army was defeated at Utriculum (perhaps Oriculum, in Umbria, halfway between Rome and Ravenna), in a battle with 50,000 dead. After his defeat, Heraclianus fled to Carthage, where he was put to death by envoys sent to him by Honorius. He was murdered in the temple of Memoria. Sabinus, Heraclianus' son-in-law, fled to the eastern court in Constantinople, but was later returned and subsequently exiled.

Later historians have concluded that the departure of the Visigoths to Gaul in 412 meant that Constantius had his hands free in Italy and could focus all his attention on Heraclianus. It enabled him to deploy all his forces when Heraclianus arrived in Italy in early March 413. Modern historians such as Wijnendaele, on the other hand, conclude that Constantius was absent with his field army and that Heraclianus was defeated by the Scholae Palatinae, the troops left behind to protect Emperor Honorius. This claim is supported by the tradition that Honorius' army was not commanded by Contantinus III, but was commanded by Marinus, the comes domesticorum, the most important general in Italy after the magisteri militum. It is not inconceivable that this elite army ambushed the numerically strong African army and was able to easily defeat it due to a tactical advantage.

Consequences

Heraclianus' name does not appear in the Fasti consulares, the list of all Roman consuls, because Emperor Honorius withdrew his appointment when Heraclianus revolted. Flavius Lucius is the only one recorded as consul that year. Heraclianus' actions were hushed up and all his possessions, 2,000 pounds of gold and land of equal value, were seized after his death and given to Constantius.

Despite the victory of Constantius III, the conflict between imperial generals foreshadowed what would later cause the decline of the Roman Empire. The civil war helped weaken the Roman state, causing the political, military and economic system of the once glorious Roman empire to accelerate into a downward process that led to its collapse. The conflict between Constantius III and Heraclianus can therefore be seen as one of the many links in the chain of events that set in motion the downfall of the Roman Empire. The war in 413 was part of the downfall that marked a turning point in European history.